

The Spiritual Education of Children—a Foundation for Community Building

In calling for the transformation of the world and the regeneration of its peoples, Bahá'u'lláh calls upon His followers to pay particular attention to the training of children:

We prescribe unto all men that which will lead to the exaltation of the Word of God amongst His servants, and likewise, to the advancement of the world of being and the uplift of souls. To this end, the greatest means is education of the child.

The task of providing this spiritual education for children is a service described by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in these words: “Among the greatest of all services that can possibly be rendered by man to Almighty God is the education and training of children, young plants of the Abhá Paradise....”

In light of the paramount importance attached to children’s education in the Writings, it is not surprising that Bahá’í children’s classes have been a vital concern of the Bahá’í community since its earliest days. However, with the inception of the Four Year Plan the training of human resources for this important responsibility became more systematic and widespread. In the message on the Four Year Plan, the House of Justice wrote:

The regular holding of Bahá’í children’s classes should be given high priority. Indeed in many parts of the world this is the first activity in a process of community building, which, if pursued vigorously, gives rise to the other developments.

Four years later, in the Twelve Month Plan, the House of Justice called on Bahá’ís to raise this area of activity “to new levels of intensity” and in the Five Year Plan it identified children’s classes as a core activity that should be open to all children, not only to those from Bahá’í families.

The experience of the past five years has yielded significant learning about how Bahá’í classes can be open to the children of the world and how this activity can give rise to “other developments.” The accounts that follow illustrate the efforts of believers worldwide to promote the multiplication of children’s classes and the potential of this core activity to advance the process of entry by troops. These stories testify to the ready response of parents in all parts of the globe when the Bahá’ís offer spiritual education to their children.

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Raising up teachers of classes for children

Training in Ruhi Institute Book 3 has given thousands of individuals the confidence to initiate children’s classes. In some cases, the believers completing this institute course have established the first Bahá’í classes for children in their area. This account illustrates the impact that institute training can have on those who have never before taught children:

Russia. I completed the sequence of courses, and even though I have two children of my own, I could never imagine that I would be a teacher of children’s classes. Somehow I was

not sure that I would manage. When I was talked into starting a small children's class (including my son as a participant), I still did not feel very confident. On the day of my first class I talked to my child and asked him to support me. He sighed heavily but agreed. And how easily everything went through! It appeared that I *am* able to have rapport with children. I felt a lot of light and joy in my heart. The children helped me a lot and the creative part of the lesson was very interesting and diverse: one child decided to draw a picture and another one wrote a story on the topic.

Senegal. A Bahá'í youth fulfills her long-cherished desire to teach children's classes and is successful despite some opposition.

After completing Book 3, I had but one desire: to hold a Bahá'í class for children. As I have a good relationship with my neighbors, it was easy to get started. I explained the program to the parents and they were eager for me to offer the classes. So I began the classes last October in my home with four and five-year old children from the neighborhood. Very soon the classes were invaded by the big brothers and sisters of my students. I therefore decided to hold a second class for children aged 9 to 12. I am helped by a young Bahá'í girl from my community who studied the Ruhi books when I did. Having the children's classes at home has enabled my mother to invite the children's parents to the devotional gatherings she holds.

Everything was going well until a neighbor decided to tell the parents that I was trying to convert their children to Catholicism. The following week, one of the mothers withdrew her son from my class. Fortunately, however, two young girls who attend my class also live in the same house. When they started putting into practice at home what I taught them in class, the attitude of the mother who had withdrawn her son changed. One morning, as these two girls sat down for breakfast, one of them suddenly remembered that they hadn't said their prayers. So they got up, said their prayers and then respectfully greeted the adults in the household, including the mother who had withdrawn her son from the classes. This lady then realized that the children were learning things beneficial to their moral and spiritual development, and she let her son return to the class.

During the whole time that the neighbor had been trying to discredit me in the eyes of my pupils' parents, I prayed fervently for God to aid me in those difficult days. I did nothing else, but my prayers were enough to ensure the parents continued trusting me. Even on days when there are no classes, the children come to my house. There are 16 in all and they are all from non-Bahá'í families. As a children's class teacher I know that prayer is the most important thing in our lives. Other important elements in the success of a class include our everyday behavior towards others and our love for the children.

Widespread receptivity to Bahá'í programs for children

Almost universally, once the believers take the first step of introducing the Faith to children, they discover that children and parents are often hungry for more. The following stories from very different settings reflect a similar experience.

United Kingdom. Where we lived previously, we knew a lovely family. They learned that we were Bahá'ís and their two sons were particularly interested. They frequently asked questions and came to see the Bahá'í float in the Worthing carnival. When we moved to our new house, we kept in touch. On several occasions the sons came to our

home and asked to learn prayers and print them off on the computer. Then quite a few months passed by without seeing them. As a result of the intensive program of growth, we were stirred into action and invited the family to spend the afternoon with us. During the afternoon we showed them the video of the Shrine of The Báb and the Terraces, which they thought were beautiful, and shared a prayer with them. They were also given some prayer cards which they were delighted to receive. As they were leaving, the sons recited a Bahá'í quote that they had learned about a year ago. I cannot say how that made me feel, except that it brought tears to my eyes. It was so moving that they had remembered the words of Bahá'u'lláh. One of the boys told me that he had put one of the prayers up on his wall and read it whenever he was feeling sad. Both sons requested to come to a Bahá'í class, which we are going to start as a result of their burning desire.

Colombia. A mother was in the midst of studying Book 3 when she became determined to host her own class for children without even finishing the course. She lived in a complex of high-rise apartment buildings where she one day noticed a group of children playing in a common area. She boldly invited them to a class. More than 12 children attended that first class held in the public lobby of one of the apartment buildings. The class continued for some months each Saturday morning with the assistance of a family member and a believer who had experience in working with children. Some months later this mother decided that she wanted to reestablish the classes, but this time through greater contact with the parents. Accompanied by another believer, she went throughout the complex talking to parents, most of whom she did not know. Her seven-year old daughter and other children went along with her, up and down elevators from one door to the next. The parents supported the class and within an hour, 14 children were at her home praying, memorizing quotations from the Writings, singing, and drawing. She now provides each child with a notebook in which they write down prayers and quotes that they are learning and glue pictures that they color. She hopes that the parents will examine their children's notebooks and become attracted to the Faith.

This receptivity among the public for the spiritual education of their children is widespread. Overcoming fears of rejection, the believers often find that these parents prove to be the most vocal advocates for Bahá'í children's classes.

Australia. The responses from parents have been amazing. My next door neighbor was here when one mother dropped off her daughter. As they were leaving, the mother commented to my neighbor that she did not know us well enough. My neighbor told her not to worry, that we were wonderful people. A couple of other mothers whom I have seen at school but are not close friends have come up to me at the shopping center and started talking about kids, school, and their hobbies so I invited them to the next class, which they happily accepted. When I found out that one child could not come to the class, I asked an additional mother whose child had not yet attended and she said that she had seen other people's invitations and readily agreed to come. So the word is getting around.

United States. Audacity and a little training bring great rewards, as a Bahá'í schoolteacher in Texas discovered. Her school has many immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries of Central and South America, so she had years of experience working with this population. When a friend suggested that she begin a class for children about virtues at an apartment complex where many of her pupils lived, she jumped into action. She approached both the manager of the complex and the mother of one of her students, who were both very enthusiastic and supportive. The classes have grown to more than 21 students between the ages

of 5 and 12, with three mothers attending. They are held in Spanish using the lesson plans from a Spanish edition of Book 3. The children memorize quotations from Bahá'u'lláh and Bahá'í prayers. Non-Bahá'í mothers invite additional children from the neighborhood for the classes.

Classes for children as “portals for entry by troops”

France. When a children's class was started with several children from non-Bahá'í families, the mothers were invited to a course based on Book 3 while their children were in their own program. This led to the mothers' studying other aspects of the Faith and resulted in declarations.

Taiwan. A Bahá'í established a moral education class at her child's elementary school. One of the other mothers was so impressed with the content of the class that she expressed an interest to know more. A Book 1 study circle was begun for this mother and she in turn invited more of her friends to join. This group of mothers continued through the sequence of courses, with several declaring as Bahá'ís. They, in turn, established five children's classes for 28 children, as well as other core activities. When they observed the positive effect that the Faith was having on their younger children, they formed a group for junior youth!

Colombia. After completing the institute's basic sequence of courses, a youth was inspired to offer a year of service. She returned home to her small village where she organized two children's classes. But her goal was not just to reach the children. As the classes began to awaken the interest of the children's parents, she decided that the time had come to share the Teachings of the Faith with the adults. She invited several friends to join her in a campaign to spread the Faith in that community. Nine declarations resulted and, in a most natural manner, the new believers and other parents were invited to study the sequence of courses and to participate in a devotional gathering. There are now two regular devotional meetings with about twenty participants. Holy Days are being celebrated and she is organizing a Unity Feast every nineteen days since the Local Spiritual Assembly is not yet functioning in her village. She is also mentoring another young lady who is striving to finish the sequence of courses and to start her own children's class.

Hong Kong. A pioneer found that her neighbors were happy to send their children to a class in her home because they wanted them to learn English from a native speaker and they did not object to the Bahá'í content of the lessons. Over time, the class grew so large that a second class had to be started. One of the local believers began to assist the pioneer because she could also communicate in Chinese. The parents have become increasingly interested in the Faith. After several years of children's classes and patient work with the parents, at least six parents are now going through Book 1.

United Kingdom. This is a beautiful first-hand account of how one mother began teaching a number of people to good effect through the simple and courageous act of beginning a class for children:

Having completed Book 3, I needed to do a practice class. After much prayer and reflection I reached out to four new friends, mothers of my seven year old daughter's friends. The class went well and after encouragement from one mother to do it regularly, we started a summer term of 12 lessons.

So began our first local Bahá'í children's class—in the sitting room of the mum who assisted, children collected by another, and the siblings babysat by a third. It was a journey we all walked together, new for me, and new for them! By the third class, things were getting challenging from a class management/control perspective. I didn't really have any answers or anybody to turn to, so I thought, "Let's have a devotional!" That was the first, the four mums invited plus a few neighborhood mums and the theme was "Mothers and Children," with Bahá'í prayers and quotations from many sources, music, and reflection.

After some very interested questioning from one mother and obvious support from another, I invited them to start a study circle with me, and I found a local Bahá'í to tutor us. One grown-up daughter joined us, so we started out as four. We took turns hosting a devotional at our homes on Sunday nights. Opportunities for spiritual conversations seemed to arise frequently and over the next few months we had all walked quite a path.

Life events meant that everyone had to take their own time with the courses. One mum will soon finish Book 4, two will soon finish Book 2, and I finished Book 7 and am tutoring Book 2 (but I started 3 years earlier). During this time the children's class has expanded by word of mouth such that 12 have attended, with 10 coming regularly. It is now held in the children's local school, as we have grown out of the sitting room. Coined "Bahá'í Club" by the children, it is now an official after-school activity.

Opportunities have arisen to share the Bahá'í Teachings with other parents because of the children's enthusiasm and commitment to the class. Sharing the prayers, quotations, and songs with their parents has resulted in their support and encouragement. The end of this term's presentation of some of our work—memorization, songs, and drama—and an invitation to "An Introduction to the Bahá'í Principles of Education" will, I hope, provide the parents with more opportunities to discover the Bahá'í Faith for themselves and join a Book 1 study circle.

Over the past eight months, three adults and the same number of children have seamlessly joined the Bahá'í community. I'm sure that many others from the community of interest will be able to do so as well. Through this experience the children's class has led the parents to Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings, and through the integration of the core activities, they themselves were able to investigate and walk their own path. Being trained from Book 1 to Book 7 has enabled a system to develop whereby one activity feeds another and in the future raises new tutors and new systems!

The impact of Bahá'í education on young children

Parents are often amazed at the influence even small efforts to impart spiritual education to their children have on their behavior.

Malaysia. A class for young children included numerous stories and references to 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The following accounts demonstrate the influence the example of the Master has had upon a three year-old boy, and an eight-year old girl.

One day the mother of the little boy said, "I was talking to my husband about some matters. My husband responded in a loud voice and so did I. Actually this has been the style of our conversation." But suddenly she heard a voice coming from below. It was her little boy appealing to her. Looking frightened because of the loud voice

(he thought they were quarreling), the young boy told his mother, “Mum, you shouldn’t speak so loud. This will not please ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá doesn’t like people to speak loud.” Such a beautiful, tender soul!

The girl came from a very difficult family environment. She started to attend a children’s class two years ago. We still remembered that when she first came she used to cry and speak foul words. She is now such a transformed girl. She likes to assist with devotionals, actively participates in dancing for performances, and is serious in the thirst for virtues. Two days ago, we found that she received an excellent progress report in her studies. She was ranked seventh in her class, up from number 22. A big, big front leap of 15 in class position! We asked her how she managed to make such progress. She said, “I pray to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and I study hard.”

Brazil. One small boy who attended a Bahá’í children’s class was always disruptive, but over time his behavior became markedly improved through the gentle instruction and nurturing of his teachers. Not only did he become a model of good behavior, but he also began to arrive at the Bahá’í Center very early and leave only when the doors were closed at night. One day, at the conclusion of the morning devotional gathering, everyone was astonished to witness this same boy seated cross-legged with arms folded, deeply immersed in meditation. Other children in the class also became better behaved and these children invited their friends to join. The changes in the children attracted non-Bahá’í mothers to attend firesides. Such changes were not apparent when the teachers first began the children’s class but they became much better at working with the children through practice.

The role of children and youth in teaching children

Youth in many countries have taken on the service of teaching children, and in some instances children themselves are assuming leadership roles to educate their peers.

Sri Lanka. Two youth who had completed the sequence through Book 6 started a children’s class together for 16 children. Within one month, the children had made notable progress.

Costa Rica. Two brothers have each established a children’s class. The 14-year old teaches children from neighborhood families and the 12-year old works with the children from Bahá’í families. They each tell their stories.

My name is Alejander and I am 14 years old. During the last teaching campaign I started, with the help of my parents, a children’s class with 10 non-Bahá’í children from my neighborhood. The first day I felt very nervous because I didn’t know what would be their reaction. I haven’t finished Book 3 and I only had the knowledge that I got from my own children’s classes. Thank God, this information helped me to give the class.

What I didn’t expect was the great interest shown by the participants. It is not necessary to remind them about the class and after each day all of them cooperate in cleaning the room and organizing the materials they used.

And his younger brother writes:

I am a 12-year old junior youth who teaches a class in the Great Metropolitan Area Cluster in Costa Rica. What motivated me to teach the class was the teaching campaign of my cluster. With the support of my family, I decided to participate in the teaching campaign by teaching children. The class is held every Sunday with 3 Bahá'í children who I try to teach spiritual qualities, about how to grow, how to respect others, and many other things. All these things are learned with the help of games, songs, stories, and other activities.

In general, these classes are a beautiful experience for me. You feel that you are cooperating with humanity because you are teaching these children to become good men and women in the future, who will contribute to the development of humankind. I also teach this class because I know that I am fulfilling my duty as a Baha'i.

Nicaragua. A class started by a 12-year old is in its fourth year. The now 16-year old seasoned teacher recounts her experience.

I began the children's class when I was only 12 years old, with a year of service youth, but he only came three times. I had not studied Book 3, so I began before I was trained. By the time I finished the book, I already had a lot of experience.

The 11 neighborhood children who attend regularly like the class so well, that during vacations they take advantage of the opportunity and come to class daily, instead of weekly. The children have all learned the 15 lessons from Book 3 very well in addition to many other lessons. One of the children who attended classes regularly is now a pre-youth and an active member of a junior youth group.

In addition to working with the children, this young teacher, usually accompanied by another Bahá'í, visits the children's parents. During these visits she asks what they think of the classes.

Parents respond that the classes are good because often when they work their children are at home alone, or maybe even in the street. How much better it is for the children to be in classes! One of the themes shared with parents during these visits was the different kinds of education. Through consultation, parents could see that their children not only need material and intellectual education, but also spiritual education—the teaching of spiritual qualities or virtues. They came to appreciate that the Bahá'í children's class teaches the children to understand and practice spiritual qualities in their daily lives. Parents say that this is good and beautiful for their children. I hope that everyone will be encouraged to give children's classes. It is a beautiful service... you learn so much about being spiritual.

Costa Rica. A 12-year old junior youth, enthusiastic about the challenge of teaching classes for children, began a class, her first experience as a teacher. Of her seven students, only two were from Bahá'í families. She utilized her own experience of attending classes when she was a girl and everything that she learned during training sessions held in her community. For different reasons, this first class did not continue; however, a few months later her Local Spiritual Assembly requested that she help with another class whose teacher was about to leave the country. At that time she was 13 years old and, of course, she was already experienced. To start, she decided to distribute invitations in her neighborhood and now she has 15 participants. The children are inviting their parents and friends to the class and they have various projects such as putting on a

play. This junior youth has not been alone in her efforts. She receives the support of several people in her community and the support of her Local Spiritual Assembly.

Children's classes as the first activity to establish or revive a community

In many cases, the classes begun by believers who had completed Book 3 were not only the very first classes for the children in the area but, in some instances, also the first Bahá'í activity and the stimulus to revive flagging communities.

South Africa. This community had been inactive for a while but had a small group of young Bahá'ís who have been visited over the years from time to time. After a few attempts to reactivate the community, two of the friends decided to take the initiative to start a children's class in the home of one of the believers. A special room was set aside for this, and benches were put around the room. The two began with their young relatives—a younger sister, and a niece. The class was held regularly every weekend and soon the numbers in the class grew to 27 children from around the neighbourhood, and only 2 are from Bahá'í families.

Ecuador. In a modest neighborhood in a “C” cluster, which had a weak Local Spiritual Assembly and not many believers, a 61-year old pioneer started a children's class. On several occasions the Bahá'í friends in the area had expressed the desire to have a children's class because one long-standing Bahá'í had four grandchildren who could attend, as well as other neighborhood children, but no one had taken up the task. This pioneer agreed to do so as long as the grandfather helped. At first the grandfather said he hadn't taught classes for 20 years and that he was busy but he finally agreed.

After a few weeks, other children started attending, and so did their mothers, aunts, and grandmothers. One of the mothers became an assistant teacher, helping with memorization and taking attendance. They ended the year with 14 children, and 10 mothers plus aunts, grandmothers, and older sisters attended the closing ceremony.

The enthusiasm generated by this activity led to a Book 3 study circle that included four veteran Bahá'ís (including the grandfather) and a non-Bahá'í. Their goal is to finish Book 4 by the end of May, and they are making plans to carry out the practices of Books 2 and 3. Five of the non-Bahá'í mothers and relatives formed a study circle and are enthusiastically studying Book 1. A significant result of this small initiative was the increased awareness by the long-time Bahá'ís about the importance of becoming trained in order to serve the Cause more effectively.

This one children's class was responsible for increasing the enthusiasm of the community, and by involving friends in the institute process, it helped to foster the spirit of unity and service that studying the sequence of courses always generates.